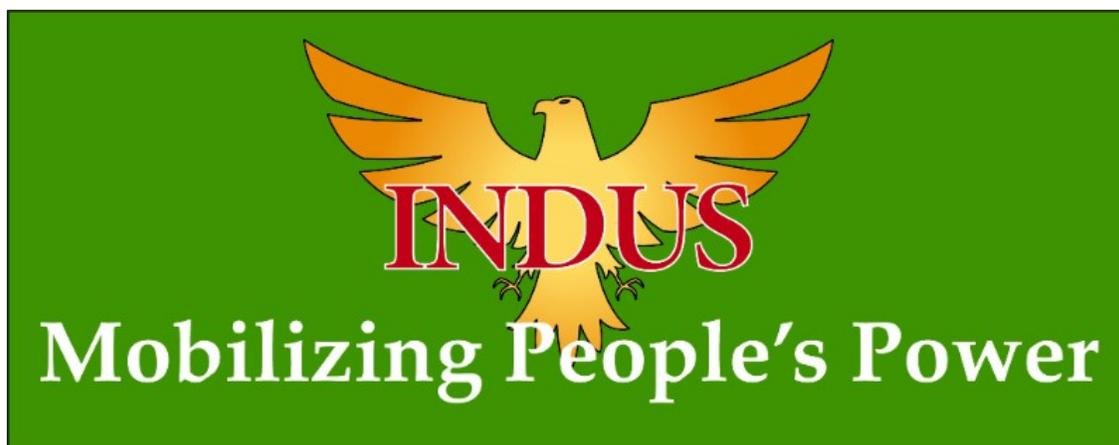


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# What a Year of Track II Discussions Says About the Future of U.S.-Pakistan Relations

[Michael Kugelman](#) and [Raouf Hasan](#)

On May 1, 1960, an American spy plane — having taken off from an airbase in Pakistan — was downed over Soviet skies, sparking a major Cold War crisis. As tensions grew, the prominent public intellectual Norman Cousins, a friend of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, invited a group of private American and Russian citizens to a meeting at Dartmouth College to discuss ways forward.

This gathering, according to a 2011 *Foreign Policy* [essay](#) by Charles Homans, established a new form of diplomacy, known as Track II: discussions between nongovernment interlocutors meant to build trust and pursue cooperation during trying times for relations between countries. Track II dialogues have become a popular way for experts and former practitioners to try to lay the groundwork for smoother exchanges on official levels.

Over the last year, our respective institutions, the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington and the Regional Peace Institute in Islamabad, co-hosted four rounds of Track II dialogue on U.S.-Pakistan relations. The a volatile partnership is in a precarious state thanks in large part to a new South Asia strategy in Washington that has rankled Islamabad, but also to Washington's increasing impatience with

what it sees as Islamabad's consistent inaction against terrorists who threaten Americans. Two rounds of dialogue took place in Washington, and two in Islamabad. The main participants were former senior American and Pakistani government and military officials, and other experts on U.S.-Pakistan relations were in the room serving as discussants and making occasional interventions.

Our main takeaway from a year of discussions is sobering: While there are still very real convergences in U.S.-Pakistan relations, the divergences are deep and daunting. Indeed, we came away with a sense that the United States and Pakistan will struggle mightily to reach common ground anytime soon on the issues generating some of the greatest tensions in the relationship: Afghanistan, India, and the Haqqani Network terrorist group. This bodes ill for a relationship already under considerable strain, and which could face major tests in the coming months.

### **The Right Time for a Track II**

The timing for our dialogue was propitious. In August, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a [South Asia strategy](#) that infuriated Islamabad with its strongly worded demand that Pakistan crack down on terrorist safe havens and its explicit call for India, Pakistan's bitter enemy, to step up its role in Afghanistan. "The authors of the strategy did a great disservice to U.S.-Pakistan relations," lamented one of our Pakistani participants. Trump administration officials have suggested they could implement punitive and, in some cases, unprecedented measures — from [expanded drone strikes](#) to the [sanctioning of Pakistani officials](#) with ties to terror — if Pakistan doesn't clear out sanctuaries on its soil. To this end, an upcoming visit to Islamabad by U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis could involve some uncomfortable discussions.

This has all unfolded against the backdrop of an increasingly unfavorable geopolitical climate for U.S.-Pakistan relations, with Washington deepening its relationship with New Delhi since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014 and Islamabad cementing its partnership with Beijing since the close allies launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in 2015. The relationship also suffers from longstanding mutual mistrust rooted in underlying grievances and actual crises (including a CIA agent's killing of two Pakistanis on a major city thoroughfare and the U.S. unilateral raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound).

One might predict, as some analysts in both the [United States](#) and [Pakistan](#) have suggested, that the United States and Pakistan will conclude that they simply don't need each other anymore.

### **Real, But Few, Convergences**

And yet, our Track II deliberations indicated little appetite for a divorce — and ample interest in making things work, at least to the extent possible in this troubled marriage. Of the several dozen Americans and Pakistanis involved in the dialogue over the year, not one suggested it was time to give up on the relationship and let it wither away.

When it comes to pathways for future cooperation, however, our discussions suggested the pickings are slim. One problem is that participants proposed and embraced a number of ideas that may prove too ambitious for a U.S. administration likely to focus narrowly on hard security issues in U.S.-Pakistan relations. This is, after all, an administration that has [sought to marginalize](#) — by cutting budgets and refusing to fill senior positions — the State Department, typically the agency that manages the non-security aspects of U.S.-Pakistan ties (along with USAID, which

also faces budget cuts and has [already suffered job cuts](#)). Additionally, a senior White House South Asia official, briefing our participants in August, bluntly stated that Trump's Pakistan policy will revolve around protecting American lives — suggesting that terrorism and security concerns will take center stage in the relationship. In contrast, the Obama administration launched and oversaw a [U.S.-Pakistan strategic dialogue process](#) that entailed annual high-level meetings on a variety of security and non-security issues. The Trump administration has so far not continued this process.

Nonetheless, participants identified several concrete options for non-security collaborations. These included intensifying cooperation on U.S.-funded regional connectivity projects like the [Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline](#) and the [CASA-1000](#) hydroelectricity project involving Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Interestingly, there was some talk of possible U.S. contributions to CPEC, though participants conceded that private-sector partnerships may be more realistic than government efforts. Other suggestions that would arguably have been more feasible in the pre-Trump era included scaling up economic investments in Pakistan and facilitating access to U.S. markets for Pakistani exports.

Two of the most promising and actionable areas of cooperation to emerge from the dialogue were discussed in considerable detail at all four rounds. One is counterterrorism cooperation targeting terror groups that threaten both countries — groups such as the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda, but especially the Afghanistan/Pakistan-based faction of ISIL, [a more recent entrant](#) into South Asia's militant milieu. Participants recommended that the United States and Pakistan model anti-ISIL efforts on the successful intelligence-sharing regime to target al-Qaeda in the years after the 9/11 attacks of 2001. This cooperation endured even in 2011, when relations were in deep crisis. That September, the two countries [announced](#) they had worked together to arrest a senior al-Qaeda figure in the province of Baluchistan. Several Pakistanis also called on Washington to aid Islamabad's counterterrorism capacities by scaling up support for civilian institutions like the police and the National Counter Terrorism Authority.

The other notable convergence relates to border security management along the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier. Several participants from both sides expressed robust support for reviving the border coordination center that was originally established a decade ago, but was suspended when U.S.-Pakistan relations fell into crisis in 2011. The crisis was catalyzed by CIA agent Raymond Davis' killing of two Pakistani men in Lahore, the raid on Bin Laden's compound, and an accidental attack by NATO helicopters that killed 24 Pakistani border troops — and prompted Islamabad to close down NATO supply routes on its soil until the Obama administration apologized for the tragedy nearly a year later. The border mechanism was meant to help Washington, Kabul, and Islamabad jointly tackle cross-border security threats. However, while the American participants acknowledged Pakistani concerns about cross-border terrorism emanating from Afghanistan, the Pakistanis were less sympathetic to American concerns about the same problem originating on the Pakistani side — suggesting a possible obstacle to this otherwise promising point of agreement.

Nonetheless, both of these pathways for cooperation have precedents. If successfully taken forward, they could help strengthen stability in Pakistan — one of the few genuinely shared interests between Washington and Islamabad.

## Deepening Divergences

However, when it comes to the countries' other chief concerns, our discussions reinforced what the constant tensions in U.S.-Pakistani ties have long shown: interests and objectives simply don't align. On many levels, our Track II was a dialogue of dissonance.

Take the political and security situation in Afghanistan, perhaps the most compelling reason for the United States and Pakistan to cooperate. Participants conceded that both countries share a hope for stability, vaguely defined, in that country — but admitted that the United States and Pakistan prefer very different means to achieve that end. There were disagreements about U.S. objectives in Afghanistan (does the United States wish to stay in the country to push back against Chinese influence or to combat terror?) and the degree of Pakistani influence over the Afghan Taliban (the Pakistanis insisted it's limited; some Americans disagreed). Almost all the Pakistanis agreed that reconciliation with the Taliban offers the best hope of ending the war, but the American side was split.

At any rate, the two sides failed to agree on how, or whether, the Americans and Pakistanis can partner in a reconciliation process — a challenge that continues to elude the two governments. The biggest achievement so far has been the willingness of Pakistan and the United States to participate, alongside Afghanistan and China, in a Quadrilateral Coordination Group to discuss reconciliation, but no Taliban representative has been present at these meetings.

There was also significant daylight between the two sides on the Haqqani Network — one of the [biggest tension points](#) in U.S.-Pakistan relations. This group, which is closely aligned with the Afghan Taliban and also retains deep ties to al-Qaeda, has [long been regarded](#) by U.S. officials as one of, if not the top, threats to Americans in Afghanistan. Significantly, American officials [contend](#) that the Pakistani security establishment harbors ties to the Haqqani Network; provides it sanctuary; and refuses to go after the group because the security establishment views it as a useful non-state asset for pushing back against India in Afghanistan. Washington and New Delhi have blamed the Haqqanis for [attacks](#) on Indian diplomatic facilities in Kabul.

So, while both sides agreed on the need for cooperation against the likes of the Pakistani Taliban and ISIL, when it came to the group that Americans believe threatens their armed forces the most, there were few convergences to be found.

The two sides fundamentally disagreed on the nature of the Haqqani Network threat, the group's location, and its possible role in Afghan reconciliation — a pitch by several Pakistanis for the Haqqanis to be considered a negotiating partner did not go down well with American participants. More broadly, discussions on militancy in Pakistan — aside from conversations about limited counterterrorism cooperation — were mired in disconnects. Many Pakistani participants insisted that militant safe havens are a thing of the past, while Americans insisted they remain a clear and present danger.

India, predictably, presented another deep divergence. Pakistanis repeatedly painted their enemy as a destabilizing actor in South Asia. Americans repeatedly depicted India as an important actor in the region, and indicated little support for their Pakistani counterparts' allegations of Indian mischief in Pakistan.

Several Pakistanis sought to strike a sanguine tone, saying a deepening U.S.-India

relationship could help Islamabad by better enabling Washington to help ease India-Pakistan tensions, particularly over India-administered Kashmir. However, the Americans were skeptical that Washington would want to plunge too deeply into the delicate matter of Kashmir, particularly given that New Delhi has expressed little interest in external mediation. Some Americans, however, did emphasize Washington's interest in helping avert future India-Pakistan conflict, and championed the idea of the U.S. government promoting deeper India-Pakistan trade relations.

### **Lessons for U.S.-Pakistan Relations**

On the one hand, our dialogue highlighted the continued potential for bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism and border management, an encouraging sign for a relationship poised to revolve largely around security issues in the coming months.

At the same time, the Trump administration's new South Asia policy is elevating to top priority the very policy issues that generated the greatest divergences at our dialogue. Washington, for example, aims to continue the policy of the four previous U.S. presidents of pursuing deeper relations with New Delhi — and has taken the unprecedented step of publicly calling on India to deepen its footprint in Afghanistan. Unlike the Obama administration, however, the current White House has vowed to use new and harsh measures if it believes Pakistan is not taking sufficient action against terrorists. Given the deep concern with which Washington views the Haqqani Network, Pakistani inaction against the Haqqanis would be one of the factors most likely to lead America to deploy punitive measures against Pakistan. Finally, the United States is ramping up its military fight in Afghanistan, effectively putting on ice — at least for now — the pursuit of a reconciliation process that Pakistanis at our dialogue insisted is essential.

The issues on which our participants disagreed and diverged the most will drive, if not dominate, U.S.-Pakistan relations for the foreseeable future. Bilateral relations are likely to suffer in a big way, and for an extended period.

To this end, perhaps the most salient recommendation to emerge from our dialogue was procedural, not policy-oriented: Take U.S.-Pakistan relations out of the spotlight and ramp up private, behind-the-scenes diplomacy to build trust — a quality in which the current relationship is dangerously deficient. More broadly, both sides called for more conversations between their governments on various issues — from seeing if there's any common ground on the Haqqani Network issue to ascertaining if there's an Afghan endgame that can satisfy both Pakistani and American interests.

Quiet diplomacy, our participants asserted, enjoys a track record of success. One American, a former senior State Department official, pointed out that U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation — the participant used the example of IED interdiction — has worked best when undertaken discreetly.

This focus on the importance of talking more speaks to the need for our Track II dialogue to continue — which we hope it will next year. True, the United States and Pakistan may not be in the throes of a Cold War crisis, as the Americans and Soviets were in 1960 after that plane went down. There may also not be as much at stake for global stability now as there was when Norman Cousins' distinguished group of Russians and Americans convened at Dartmouth to launch the first known Track II effort. And yet, when it comes to U.S.-Pakistan relations, the time remains ripe to pursue a key goal of Track II diplomacy: Explore ways to bring some breathing room to a troubled yet important relationship that faces difficult days ahead.

Winston Churchill is famously [quoted as saying](#), "It is better to jaw jaw than to war war." But in fact, extending our Track II discussions can bring benefits that go beyond the avoidance of escalation and conflict. By continuing to talk, our participants have had opportunities to develop more formal proposals about counterterrorism cooperation, one of our few areas of convergence. And if these proposals are pitched to officialdom, and carried out effectively by both nations, the U.S.-Pakistan relationship could boast new initiatives that help prevent American and Pakistani lives from being lost at the hands of the Pakistani Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIL, and other terror groups that stalk Pakistan and Afghanistan.

That would be an indication that the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, despite divergences galore, can still generate meaningful — and potentially life-saving — outcomes.

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## Regime change — the final act?

**Raza Rumi**

*Nawaz Sharif's refusal to accept the July putsch by the Supreme Court as a fait accompli was not fully anticipated while the 2017 political engineering was in full swing*

It seems that the ruling party Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) PMLN has entered the final round of its power struggle. With its party head disqualified as prime minister, the government is now besieged by angry fanatics in Islamabad and other parts of the country. As it has happened before in the country's history the Army has been asked to move in aid of civil power. Where will this end is unknown. But it's clear that political change is inevitable now.

For the past twenty days an angry group of Barelvi clerics had been protesting minor changes in the oath taken by elected officials. The move was opportunistically branded as a blasphemous act on the part of the government. As is the case, blasphemy ignites passions and mobilises scores of religious groups across the country. The government was wary of acting against this mob and perhaps it's indecision has cost the country dearly. On Saturday, a police action could not disperse the protestors. The government blocked television channels, imposed restrictions on digital media platforms and called in the Army and Rangers to control the situation.

In 1953, similar action was taken against the protestors and within a month of that

crackdown and intervention by the military, the then Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin was dismissed. In 1977, another movement with express religious overtones resulted in bloodshed, military involvement and the infamous coup on the night of July 4, 1977. Subsequently, mobilisations against several governments took place with the intended effect: regime change through undemocratic means.

It is a pity that forty years later, nothing has changed in terms of inflaming religious passions and creating an anarchic situation. At the time of writing these lines, there is an uncertain trajectory ahead. Will the government survive? Will the events lead to a military takeover or a military backed national government? Or will the PMLN government, somehow, manage the variables in its favour?

Given the media blackout and rumour mongering that follows, it is difficult to assess where things are headed. But if the tweet posted by the military spokesman is any indicator, then it's clear that the Army is struggling to remain a 'neutral' player, not fully in sync with the policy of the federal government. Major General Asif Ghafoor who heads the Inter Services Public Relations wing tweeted: "*COAS telephoned PM. Suggested to handle Isb Dharna peacefully avoiding violence from both sides as it is not in national interest & cohesion.*" The reference to 'both sides' is meaningful to say the least.

Members of the political class have been making relevant noises. The PPP has done its usual lip service to democratic continuity though its recent positions have been visibly supportive of the establishment's 'overthrow' of Nawaz Sharif and his continued role in national politics. Imran Khan has called for early elections and it is not unthinkable that both these parties would like to see the House of Sharifs fall and splinter, thereby paving the way for a changed political arena that may provide them greater space. If things were to continue, PMLN despite all odds would win the 2018 elections in the Punjab; thus making it a contender for federal government, once again.

Nawaz Sharif's refusal to accept the July putsch by the Supreme Court as a fait accompli was not fully anticipated while the 2017 political engineering was in full swing. Sharif not only pushed back and mobilized public opinion in his favor — he managed to retain control over his party and influence over the federal government. This is what has made the task of easing him out far more difficult. His party's government is an active source of patronage vital for the next elections. In addition, his rhetoric is akin to that of an opposition leader and is beneficial to the party's fortunes come the 2018 electoral contest. More importantly, if the current dispensation continues the PMLN will secure a majority in the Senate. Therefore, the stakes are high for those who want to see Nawaz Sharif's exit from the political landscape.

Perhaps this is why the embattled government's fate remains uncertain and perilous. The standoff with the Mullahs may end without regime change but the mobilisation of Barelvi clerics, madaris and networks is ominous. Barelvis are a majority sub-sect of Sunni Muslims in Pakistan. Their weaponisation is arguably the worst outcome of the power struggle in Islamabad. We have been suffering the onslaught of extremist variants of Deobandi clerics and with the Barelvi power turning violent, Pakistan is headed towards a disastrous path.

Just as we started to rejoice the state's action to rein in sectarian networks, the political mobilisation of the majority sect comes as a reality check. Business continues as usual in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. A tottering democracy,

visionless and opportunist politicians, armed Mullahs and the lurking saviour-autocrat[s] or maybe technocrats in waiting.

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## MEDIA REVIEW

### **Pakistan will always be important for US, say experts**

*Nayanima Basu*

The article suggests that Pakistan will always be important to US strategy for counterterrorism in Afghanistan. Former Indian diplomat KC Singh said that "India should be very careful in coming under US' radar when it comes to their strategy for Asia Pacific or offshore balancing." [[The Hindu Business Line](#)]

### **The engineering fiasco in Karachi**

*Mosharraf Zaidi*

The politics of Karachi are a "spectacular disaster" but Karachi's problems are not unique to Karachi. They were exacerbated by its unclear identity, the result of an overdue census, now contended for the electoral power and national funds it commands. The major challenge is a national one: to reconcile national identity with certain ethnoreligious groups' desire to be recognized on ethnic and religious grounds. [[The News](#)]

### **Saudi Arabia's Saturday Night Massacre**

*George Friedman*

The author explains what drove Saudi Arabia and King Salman to select his son, Mohammad bin Salman, to succeed him. Mohammad bin Salman unveiled Vision 2030, a transformational plan to reorient the country's economy and cultural power centers, leading to the arrest of princes and ex-ministers that might have challenged him. The arrests "will stand as the beginning of a new Saudi Arabia or as the end of the experiment. Either way, the Saudis are weakening." [[Geopolitical Futures](#)]

### **Pakistan's First Ever ICTD Conference Explores Solutions to Pressing Development Needs**

*TR Pakistan*

Over 200 researchers and academics attended the 9th Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICTD) conference in Lahore – the first time it was held in Pakistan. Among other breakthroughs, the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB) revealed it had digitized the data of 50,000 schools and five million farmers in Punjab province for use by the ICTD community to find solutions to development problems in agriculture, poverty, and rural development. [[MIT Technology Review](#)]

### **An Existential Threat**

*Sherry Rehman*

Recent smog is a symptom of climate change, a national security concern for Pakistan that must be tackled soon: Pakistan is the 6<sup>th</sup> most vulnerable country to climate change, and environmental degradation reduces GDP growth by 6%. Pakistan needs to take ownership of its climate change, water management, food, and energy security policies. [[Express Tribune](#)]

### **Patel resignation exposes UK's covert support for Israel and Islamist proxies**

*Jean Shaoul*

The author examines the actions of Priti Patel, the former secretary of the Department for International Development (DFID), that led to her resignation from the British cabinet in

November. According to BBC reporting, after unofficial engagements with Israeli officials, Patel sought to direct British aid in support of Israeli policies and interests in Syria. [[WSWS](#)]

### **Artificial lights are eating away at dark nights — and that's not a good thing**

*Amina Khan*

A new study using satellite data finds that artificially lit surfaces around the world are spreading and growing brighter, acting as “an environmental pollutant with ecological and evolutionary implications”. [[Los Angeles Times](#)]

### **One of Japan's biggest companies is investing \$100 billion in the information revolution**

*Brad Jones*

SoftBank Group, a Japanese company, is providing \$100 billion in funding for promising tech companies to keep the information revolution moving forward. The SoftBank Vision Fund received \$45 billion from Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund and \$15 billion from Abu Dhabi’s Mubadala Investment Company. The author notes two themes to its funding decisions: projects that make tangible improvements to people’s lives and ideas that will underpin the next stage of the information revolution. [[Futurism](#)]

### **Not who but what**

*Dr. Haider Mehdi*

Pakistan needs to fight to attain true democracy because the political status quo and “a vicious, self-serving 8 years of muk-muka” is “an existential threat.” The author describes what kind of leader and what leadership qualities are required to achieve a “complete political overhaul.”

[[Express Tribune](#)]

### **Who Are Sufi Muslims and Why Do Some Extremists Hate Them?**

*Megan Specia*

“Sufism is a mystical form of Islam, a school of practice that emphasizes the inward search for God and shuns materialism...cherishes tolerance and pluralism.” It has come under attack in Egypt, Pakistan, and elsewhere. The author describes Sufism’s roots, why it is targeted by extremists, and the status of Sufis in Egypt. [[New York Times](#)]



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